

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
TRSE-00 OMB-01 EB-08 /074 W
-----006804 031427Z /75

R 031035Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 263
INFO AMEMBASSY DACCA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 COLOMBO 2076

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, CE

SUBJ: A CLOSE LOOK AT THE JAYEWARDENE GOVERNMENT

1. INTRODUCTION:

IT IS NOW TIME FOR AN ASSESSMENT OF THE WAY THE JAEWARDENE GOVERNMENT IS HANDLING ITS AFFAIRS. AFTER A DYNAMIC START, WITH MANY INNOVATIONS EFFECTED DURING THE FIRST THREE MONTHS, THERE HAS BEEN A NOTICEABLE SLOWDOWN.

2. THE PRESIDENT REMAINS CENTRAL:

THE PRESIDENT REMAINS THE CENTRAL FIGURE. NO MAJOR DECISION IS MADE WITHOUT HIM, EITHER AT CABINET MEETINGS, WHICH HE CHAIRS, OR IN AD HOC DISCUSSIONS WITH THE MINISTRY IN QUESTION AND A HANDFUL OF TRUSTED ADVISORS.

3. EARLY ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

JAYEWARDENE HAS A REPUTATION FOR LISTENING CAREFULLY, SAYING LITTLE AND DECIDING QUICKLY. HIS STYLE HAS MANY BUFFALOED. HE MARSHALS ARGUMENTS EFFECTIVELY, PERSUADES WITH QUIET REASON.
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FOLLOWING THE ELECTION, HE WAS DEPICTED AS HAVING ALMOST SUPER-NATIONAL QUALITIES OF FORESIGHT, DETAILED KNOWLEDGE ON EVERY ISSUE, AND A PERFECT SENSE OF POLITICAL TIMING. HIS SUCCESS IN LINING UP IMF SUPPORT, IN DRAWING YOUNGER, WELL-EDUCATED MEN INTO HIS CABINET, IN THROWING OVER ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS OF THE PREVIOUS REGIME AND CUTTING THE RICE RATION IN HALF WITHOUT EVOKING NOTICEABLE POLITICAL PROTESTS -- ALL CONFIRMED

THIS REPUTATION.

4. IMPROVED STAFF WORK IN PRESIDENT'S OFFICE:

WORLD BANK, IMF AND CERTAIN BILATERAL ASSISTANCE STAFFS CONFIRM THAT THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE IS WELL-MANAGED, THAT STAFF PAPERS ARE NOW OF A HIGH QUALITY AND THAT THE DEVELOPMENT MINISTRIES ARE WELL-COORDINATED BY THE CABINET SECRETARY AS NEVER BEFORE.

5. PRESIDENT AND MINISTERS: CABINET CHANGES?:

THE PRESIDENT WORKS THROUGH HIS MINISTERS IN THE FIRST INSTANCE. HE IS REPUTEDLY UNHAPPY ABOUT SOME OF THEM, MINLY THE OLD STAGERS WHO WERE PART OF THE UNP BEFORE HE TOOD CONTROL IN 1973. THEY ARE PARTY LOYALISTS BUT WERE NEVER HOT SHOTS. THERE HAVE BEEN MANY RUMORS OF CABINET CHANGES, AND MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC, THE PRESS AND ADMINISTRATION WOULD WLECOME A SWEEP OUT OF THE MORE INCOMPETENT -- THE MINISTERS OF SHIP-PING, AVIATION AND TOURISM, OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, OF AGRICULTURE, AND OF TRANSPORTATION ARE ALL FAVORITE CANDIDATES. BUT HE HESITATES, AS IF HE FEARS TO PRECIPITATE RIFTS IN THE PARTY. TO MANY THIS SEEMS AN UNNECESSARY TIMIDITY SINCE HIS MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT IS ENORMOUS AND HIS STATUS IN THE PARTY AND THE COUNTRY IS STILL UNASSAIAABLE -- AND HIS WAFFLING ON CABINET CHANGES IS ERODING HIS REPUTATION FOR DECISIVENESS. HIS PERSONAL STAFF IS WORRIED ABOUT THIS AND PROFESS TOBE PUZZLED AS TO WHY HE HESITATES. SOME CRITICIZE (AND CONFIDENTIAL

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OTHERS EXPRESS ADMIRATION) THAT THE 72 YEAR OLD PRESIDENT, HAVING FINALLY REACHED THE PINNACLE OF POWER, NOW ACTING LIKE A GOOD BUDDHIST KING, FORGIVES EVEN THOSE WHO DO HIM HARM. OTHERS THINK HE JUST DOESN'T WANT TO ROCK THE BOAT; IT IS EASIER TO CARRY ON AS IS.

6. MOREOVER, MINISTERS ARE VERY POWERFUL WITHIN THEIR PARTICULAR BAILIWICK. TO DEPRIVE A PERSON OF SUCH POWER IN THIS SEMI-FEUDAL SOCIETY CAN GENERATE INTENSELY BITTER FAMILY FEUDS AND PRECIPITATE CAMPAIGNS FOR PERSONAL REVENGE IRRESPECTIVE OF THE COSTS TO PARTY OR POLITY, AS JAYEWARDENE HIMSELF EXPERIENCED DURING THE PAST STORMY 30 YEARS OF THE UNP'S HISTORY. SO HE HOLDS BACK, WAITING FOR MINISERS TO HAND THEMSELVES BY EGREGIOUS INCOMPETENCE OR FOR THE EMERGENCE OF SOME SACE SAVER TO EASE THE DESCENT OF A DISMISSED MINISTER.

7. PRESIDENTIAL SPECIAL APPOINTEES:

ANOTHER WAY HE COPES IS TO ASSIGN SPECIAL TASKS TO SPECIAL PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTEES. GENERAL ATTYGALLE, FORMER COMMANDER OF THE ARMY, IS IN CHARGE OF "STRAIGHTENING OUT" THE AIRPORT AND PORTS, IN ADDITION TO HIS REGULAR FUNCTION AS ADDITIONAL SECRETARY OF MINISTRY OF DEFENSE. N.G.P. PANDITERATNE IS THE

NEW COORDINATOR OF THE MAHAWELI PROJECT, ACTING ON BEHALF OF THE PRESIDENT AS THE PROJECT TSAR. HE IS A DISTINGUISHED CPA WITH BUSINESS CONNECTIONS TO THE JAYEWARDENE INTERESTS, WHO AFTER THE ELECTION WAS APPOINTED TO THE MONETARY BOARD, EQUIVALENT TO OUR FEDERAL RESERVE BOARD, TO ENSURE THE CENTRAL BANK FOLLOWED POLICIES DESIRED BY THE PRESIDENT. HE HAS DONE OTHER HIGH LEVEL CHORES FOR THE PRESIDENT, INCLUDING "KEEPING IN TOUCH" WITH YOUR AMBASSADOR. HIS TASK IS TO COORDINATE THE MINISTRIES OF IRRIGATION, PUBLIC WORKS, AGRICULTURE AND LANDS, FINANCE AND TRANSPORTATION AND FOREIGN DONORS AS THEY ALL CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE MAHAWELI PROJECT. HE IS HIGHLY INTELLIGENT AND HARD WORKING AND EXPERIENCED IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR. BUT SOME WONDER WHETHER ANYONE WHO TALKS SO MUCH IS READY TO LISTEN ENOUGH, AND WHETHER HE KNOWS HOW TO MANIPULATE

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THE HUGE, SLUGGISH BUREAUCRATIC BODIES THAT MUST BE MADE TO MOVE EXPEDITIOUSLY AND IN COOPERATION.

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8. PRESIDENT'S TIME AND POSSIBLE ISOLATION:
AS PRESIDENT, JAYEWARDENE IS SPARED THE TIME HE WOULD HAVE HAD TO DEVOTE TO PARLIAMENT IF HE WERE PRIME MINISTER. ALTHOUGH HE IS CLEARLY IN CHARGE,

HE RISKS LOSING TOUCH WITH EMERGING TRENDS OF OPINION. PROTOCOL NOW SURROUNDS HIM AS IT DID NOT PREVIOUS PRIME MINISTERS. WHILE HE STILL CHAIRS THE CABINET, MINISTERS ACKNOWLEDGE THEY TREAT HIM WITH MORE DEFERENCE AS PRESIDENT THAN THEY DID AS PRIME MINISTER. WHILE THE PRESS IS LESS INTIMIDATED THAN UNDER THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT, MP'S AND MINISTERS WHO HAVE BEEN CRITICIZED IN THE PRESS HAVE BEEN QUICK TO RAISE QUESTIONS OF PRIVILEGE IN PARLIAMENT, AND THE PRESS THEREFORE DEALS WITH MINISTERS AND PARLIAMENTARIANS VERY GINGERLY. THIS MAKES IT HARD FOR THE PRESIDENT TO KNOW WHEN MINISTERS ARE OVERSTEPPING THE BOUNDS OF PROPRIETY AND RUMORS OF KICKBACKS AND NEPOTISM ARE AGAIN SURFACING.

9. HIS STAFF TIRES TO MINIMIZE THE HAZARDS OF ISOLATION. ALTHOUGH HIS APPOINTMENT CALENDAR IS NOT CONFIDENTIAL

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PUBLISHED, WE UNDERSTAND IT IS FLEXIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE TO A WIDE RANGE OF PERSONALITIES. HE HAS ALSO SET ASIDE 7:00-8:00 A.M. THREE DAYS A WEEK FOR UNSCHEDULED DISCUSSIONS WITH MINISTERS AND MP'S. THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION SAYS HE SEES HIM WHENEVER HE ASKS. BUT GIVEN HIS POWER TO APPOINT HIS CABINET AND THE AURA OF HIS NEW POSITION, THE "OVAL OFFICE" SYNDROME IS AT WORK HERE, TOO, AND CAN EASILY THOUGH IMPERCEPTIBLY INSULATE HIM.

10. CEREMONIAL BURDENS:

WHILE THE PRESIDENCY SPARES HIM TIME FROM PARLIAMENT, IT HAS ADDED BURDENS OF CEREMONIAL AND SYCOPHANTS ARE BUSY PERSONALLY CURRYING FAVOR IN AN ASIAN WAY BY SETTING UP OCCASIONS WHICH GLORIFY HIM AND HIS CLOSE FAMILY. NEARLY EVERY OTHER DAY SEES HIM IN A PUBLIC CEREMONIAL FUNCTION. TO BE SURE, SOME OF THESE SEEK TO LINK HIS OFFICE TO NATIONAL OR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS. ALL AFTERNOON AND EVENING WERE RECENTLY DEVOTED TO RECEIVING AND PAYING HOMAGE TO BUDDHA RELICS FROM INDIA, FOR EXAMPLE. OTHERS SEEM LESS IMPORTANT BUT TIME CONSUMING. HE OPENS EXHIBITIONS, IS GUEST OF HONOR WHEN A NEW PLAY OPENS ON THE LOCAL BROADWAY, HE ATTENDS THE ANNUAL CHAMPIONSHIP CIRCKET MATCH. THE LATEST WAS DEDICATING A NARROW-GAUGE TRAIN SET UP IN VICTORIA PARK BY PRIME MINISTER PREMADASA FOR THE PLEASURE OF CHILDREN AND AN UNVEILING OF PORTRAITS OF PRESIDENT AND MRS. JAYEWARDDBFE AND PRIME MINISTER AND MRS.PREMADASA. THIS IS PART OF THE POPULARLY EXPECTED ROLE OF THE

SOUTH ASIAN POTENTATE BUT REPELS THE MORE
SOPHISTICATED AND FITS ILL WITH UNP CRITICISMS OF MRS.
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BANDARANAIKE'S SELF-GLORIFICATION.

11. COMMENT: ALL THIS ADDS UP TO A MIXED BAG--MUCH
ACCOMPLISHMENT EARLY ON, A TIGHTENING AND RATIONALIZING
OF POLICY COORDINATION AT THE PRESIDENTIAL LEVEL WHICH
SHOULD SHOW PAYOFFS IN COMING MONTHS. HOWEVER, A
TOLERATION OF MINISTERIAL INCOMPETENCE AND SYCOPHANCY
WHICH SEEMS OUT OF CHARACTER WITH HIS GIVEN REPUTATION.
ALTHOUGH NOT YET SERIOUS, HIS IMAGE AS A DYNAMIC LEADER
HAS SUFFERED SOMEWHAT IN PUBLIC'S EYE.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: FORM OF GOVERNMENT, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 03 may 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978COLOMB02076
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780188-0828
Format: TEL
From: COLOMBO
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780599/aaaadghm.tel
Line Count: 243
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 922ab2a5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 06 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2809120
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: A CLOSE LOOK AT THE JAYEWARDENE GOVERNMENT
TAGS: PFOR, PGOV, CE
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odhc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/922ab2a5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014